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FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
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INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000131

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

NEA/ARP, IRF, DRL, IO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: MAKING A FIRST UMRAH IN MECCA: AN INSIDE VIEW

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 5, 2009, ConGen Jeddah political officer made a first visit to the Masjid Al-Haram(Grand Mosque) in Mecca in the company of three American Muslims of Sudanese origin, two men and one woman, in order to perform together the Umrah (visit to the holy places). Following is a first-hand account of the rituals typifying that experience for a Muslim believer. END SUMMARY.

ENTERING THE MASJID AL-HARAM

2.(U) Umrah visitors to the Masjid Al-Haram(Grand Mosque) in Mecca have the choice of wearing the "ihram," the traditional garments worn by pilgrims for Hajj and Umrah or their normal clothing. The ihram, which consists of two pieces of heavy white cloth, is optional for Umrah but mandatory for Hajj. Removing shoes, the Umrah visitors entered the Masjid Al-Haram through King Abdul Aziz Gate, one of seven main entry gates to the structure and encountered hundreds of worshippers sitting and offering individual prayers on the mosque's rug-covered marble floors. As visitors make their way toward the Ka'aba, it is common to encounter various national groups sitting and reading the Quran together. Some groups are wholly male, others all female, and some mixed gender. The Ka'aba is located in the open-air portion of the mosque. The marble floor has a built-in cooling system, cool to the touch even under the extreme heat of desert sun.

CIRCLING THE KA'ABA

¶3. (U) Visitors normally begin their Umrah experience by circling the Ka'aba seven times in a ritual known as "tawaf," starting at the corner that houses Al-Hajr Al-Aswad (the Black Stone) and moving counterclockwise. Muslims believe that the Black Stone was placed by the Prophet Muhammad; however, accounts differ of the stone's origin and significance (from having come to earth as a meteorite to its having become black from having absorbed human sins). Performing the tawaf, visitors make their way to the corner of the Ka'aba at which the Black Stone is fixed, turning toward the Ka'aba and raising right hands while uttering the phrases "God is Great(Allahu Akbar)" and "In the Name of God (Bismillah)" in Arabic. Between the corner that houses the Black Stone and the Yemeni corner (named for the southerly direction it faces -- towards Yemen), all worshippers chant a short Arabic prayer which translates: "Our Lord give us good in this life and good in the Hereafter and save us from the punishment of Hell Fire." During the remainder of the tawaf, worshippers traditionally offer personal supplications or have a guide lead them in prayer.

¶4. (U) Despite the relatively small number of worshippers(400-500) making the tawaf on this occasion, the crowd was tightly packed around the Ka'aba, as worshippers tried to inch closer to the structure with each rotation. Most tried repeatedly to touch or kiss the Black Stone. Some pushed and shoved to position themselves in a queue in front

of the stone. Upon reaching it, worshippers have a brief second or two to touch or kiss it before a Saudi guard, himself suspended from the Ka'aba in a kind of harness, gently pushes them along. If competing with males to touch the stone, women are sometimes made to wait until after the males have completed the ritual. Those who are unable to get close to the Black Stone because of the crowd may manage instead to touch the Yemeni corner, which believers hold was sometimes touched by the Prophet himself during his tawaf.

¶5. (U) The group of worshippers circling the Ka'aba were young and old, male and female; the elderly and disabled were pushed in wheelchairs. Although the crowd was densely packed and there was much pushing and shoving, none of the worshippers seemed to become upset or impatient. After completing the tawaf around the Ka'aba, worshippers usually perform two individual raka (full prayer motions), facing toward the Ka'aba.

JOGGING BETWEEN THE TWO HILLS OF SAFA AND MARWA

¶6. (U) Finally, visitors complete their Umrah experience with what is known as a "sa,i," which consists of walking briskly back and forth seven times between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, located inside the grand mosque a few feet from the Ka'aba. According to tradition, worshippers walk up the hill of Safa, face the Ka'aba and chant "God is Great" and "In the Name of God" three times in Arabic, retracing the footsteps of Abraham's servant-wife Hagar, the mother of Ishmael (father of the Arabs). They then walk briskly and at times jog down a long, enclosed corridor designed for one-way traffic towards Marwa uttering personal supplications or

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repeating the prayers shouted loudly by a guide. The corridor has high ceilings and open areas along the wall. At a point approximately one quarter of the length of the corridor a strip of green lights on the wall and ceiling indicates that worshippers should jog lightly and approximately 100 feet away a second set of green lights advises worshippers they may cease jogging. Upon reaching the top of Marwa visitors once again turn towards the Ka'aba and repeat in Arabic "God is Great" and "In the Name of God" three times. Next they enter the one-way corridor towards Safa and repeat the process. According to custom, believers make seven circuits back and forth between the two hills.

¶7. (U) During the sa,i, some worshippers walk throughout while others jog. Most do a combination of gaits. And, again, the elderly and disabled are pushed in wheelchairs between the two hills.

WELL OF ZAM ZAM

¶8. (U) Visitors who have been to the holy site previously notice the disappearance of the entrance to the well of Zam Zam. Until recently, the well, which Muslims believe God caused to spring forth in response to Hagar's frantic search for water for her son Ishmael, was made accessible to pilgrims by a stairwell located about 50 feet away from the Ka'aba. Recently the stairwell was closed because it caused traffic jams during the Hajj as some pilgrims tried to obtain Zam Zam water (believing in its special properties) while others tried to complete tawafs around the Ka'aba. In an effort to solve this problem, Saudi authorities closed access to the well from the ground floor and have placed Zam Zam water in labeled coolers with plastic cups all around the Mosque for worshippers to drink and carry with them. On the roads in and out of Mecca some of the poorer residents of the holy city often sell Zam Zam water to visitors.

HAIRCUT

¶9. (U) As is customary after completing the Umrah rites, visitors have the option to receive a full haircut or merely

have small snippets of hair removed. On a typical Umrah day approximately 20-30 haircutters, most of whom appear to be non-Saudi, stand with scissors at the ready, waiting for believers to finish the sa'i at the top of Marwa. Visitors (men or women) wishing only to have snippets cut usually pay between 10 and 20 SAR (\$3-6) to have the barber quickly clip three or four areas from around the head. For those desiring a full, close-cropped haircut, there is a string of barbershops located outside the Masjid Al-Haram on the street behind Marwa for this purpose. However, many visitors simply bring a pair of scissors and cut their own hair.

MIXING OF GENDERS

¶10. (SBU) In stark contrast to the complete separation of the sexes in all mosques and in most public settings throughout Saudi Arabia, in the Masjid Al-Haram, Islam's holiest site, women are often scattered throughout the mosque, performing rites alongside male worshipers. Men and women circle the Ka'aba together, pray individually alongside each other and walk between the hills of Safa and Marwa together. Some women wear the ihram, the traditional white pilgrimage clothing covering body and hair; others wear the abaya (traditional black Saudi robe) and hijab (full head covering); still others wear floor length, long sleeve national dress with a head covering.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: In this account of a March 5 visit to Mecca's Masjid Al-Haram, poloff shares with readers a glimpse of the process of Umrah at Islam's holiest site. Although the crowds that day did not nearly match the level of the annual Hajj or even a busy Umrah day, Saudi authorities had in place an efficient system to accommodate large numbers of ethnically diverse believers. END COMMENT.

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